

## Rain Gardens

Gardeners in communities throughout the United States are beginning to plant rain gardens. This new, environmentally helpful water feature looks and acts like a mini wetland, providing valuable habitat for birds and butterflies as well as an opportunity for gardeners to grow interesting and beautiful 'wet' plants.

Unlike natural wetlands, rain gardens are fed by storm water runoff from impervious, man made surfaces like roofs and paving. In the Northwest, this "unwanted" storm water was historically considered a nuisance in the garden, and homeowners have installed drainage systems to move storm water as quickly as possible and into the nearest gutter or storm drain.

This seemed like a fine solution - out of sight, out of mind. But urban stormwater runoff doesn't disappear when it leaves our property. In Seattle, much of it flows straight into urban creeks and from there into Puget Sound. This runoff brings with it all kinds of contaminants - motor oil, pesticides, fertilizers and pet waste. And because much of the city is paved (or roofed), there's a lot of runoff when it rains.

These big flows of dirty water can scour stream channels, destroy wildlife habitat, and cause flooding. A textbook example is Piper's Creek. One of Seattle's few remaining creeks with a returning salmon population, Piper's flows through north Seattle and into Puget Sound. And, like many other urban tributaries, it takes with it a long list of contaminants effecting not just the creek but the Sound as well - including much-loved creatures such as salmon and orca whales.

Happily, as more of us learn about these serious environmental impacts we're finding ways to make a difference by looking to newer and better solutions - such as rain gardens! Rain gardens use the concept of bioretention. Like a natural wetland, rain garden plants and soils remove pollutants from stormwater. Rain gardens employ water tolerant plants and specific layers of soil, sand and compost. These layers naturally filter and clean stormwater, giving it a chance to slowly soak into the ground, recharge groundwater and ultimately return to the sound.

Rain gardens are best sited in lower areas of the garden away from the house or other structures. Typically, some grading is necessary to create a "depression" adequate to temporarily capture water. Once grades are set and the soil amended properly, existing or new drain lines can be directed to drain into the area. Roof downspouts, area drains in paving, and French drains in plantings can all be directed to the rain garden or areas surrounding the rain garden can simply be sloped to it. The water can be conveyed underground in solid pipes or above ground as a kind of seasonal stream water feature.

The result can be a beautiful, functional garden feature that helps to protect clean water.

To learn more, come to a FREE Rain Gardening class (3/22/03) provided by Seattle Parks & Recreation as part of the Living Green spring workshop series (funded by Puget Sound Water Quality Action Team). Classes will be held at the Phinney Neighborhood Center. To register call at 783-2244. For more information call 684-0877 or go to <http://www.phinneycenter.org>.